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**Repurposing the (Super)Crip: Media Representations of Disability at the Rio
2016 Paralympic Games**

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Abstract

Mega-events attract ever larger media audiences, and the 2016 Rio Paralympics were no exception. As audiences grow, media coverage extends to ever more varied domains, which are themselves then colonised by an increasing range of discourses. One of main discourses to develop since the early 2000s has been that of the so-called “supercrip”, one which challenges the notion of “impairment” often connected with disability by foregrounding the para-athletes’ triumph over adversity, celebrating instead their courage, grit and perseverance leading to athletic success and personal and increasingly national prestige. In this article we analyse the continuing importance of the supercrip discourse in coverage of the Rio Paralympics, but also move on to highlight its tactical alignment with other – both competing and complementary – discourses of nationalism, sexualisation, militarisation and celebritisation. We analyse textual and visual manifestations of these discourses using both Critical Discourse Analysis and Foucauldian discourse analysis. We conclude by paying particular attention to the increasing visibility of discourses which, while acknowledging the potentially positive role of the supercrip discourse in focussing on athletic success, repurpose that discourse by foregrounding instead the day-to-day experiences of belittling misrepresentation and neglect, including political neglect.

Key words: parasport; media representations; supercrip; sexualisation; militarisation; politicisation

Introduction

Sport events for para-athletes have for some time now been the subject of intense academic interest and analysis (e.g. Bissell, 2015; Bush et al, 2013; Butler & Cherney, 2015; Ellis, 2009; Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Hodges et al, 2015; Misener, 2013; Silva & Howe, 2012; Smith & Thomas, 2005). These events provide opportunities for raising awareness of disability because they now reach significant media audiences particularly in the global north (McPherson et al, 2016; Shapiro & Pitts, 2014), garnering widespread attention in print media, on-line news feeds and via broadcast television and associated digital platforms, thereby providing an opportunity to educate and inform, as well as entertain audiences. However, previous research has indicated that there remains concern from para-athletes, persons with a disability and those responsible for governing parasport about media representations and their potential impact on the way disability (and disability sport) is talked about – and with what longer-term effects (Hodges et al, 2014). Television coverage of the London 2012 Paralympic Games on the UK's Channel 4 (hereafter C4) has been shown to have had a positive impact on how disability was covered in the media, especially in communicating the social agenda message around influencing attitudes; creating a thrilling elite live sport event experience; and in enabling familiarity and neutralisation of difference in coverage (Hodges et al, 2014). However, previous research also suggested that there remained an over-reliance on the narrative of “triumph over adversity” in television coverage and in how audiences responded to the Paralympic Games in 2012 (Ellis & Goggins, 2015; Grue, 2015; Smith et al, 2017; Pullen et al, 2018; Kearney et al, 2019).

In this article we examine in detail UK media coverage of the 2016 Rio Paralympics, looking for continuities and discontinuities with earlier representations

and the emergence of new trends and patterns of reporting on disability in the international parasports-competition arena. We focus in particular on the growing body of journalistic output which challenges the fundamental premises of the supercrip discourse and places it firmly within a broader political frame of societal inequality and neglect.

From “Invisible” to “Incredible”: Paralympic Games and media framing of disability

As Hodges et al suggest, “the Paralympics, and related media coverage of the Games, provides significant opportunity to influence public attitudes regarding disability and disability sport; challenging dominant stereotypes and encouraging a continued move away from disability sport as therapeutic value, towards prestigious elite-level competition” (2014, p. 6). And yet, the media industries have been the subject of significant critique for the lack of representation – and the dominant narratives projected – in relation to disability (and disability sport). Various, the media has been accused of: ignoring the Paralympics almost entirely until well into the turn of the new millennium (Russo, 2010); emphasising disabled people as defined by their disability and unable to participate fully in everyday life; perpetuating the medical model of disability focusing on impairment and personal tragedy narratives (Berger, 2008); more recently projecting narratives where disabled people “overcome” adversity and are portrayed as superhuman (Goodley, 2011; Silva & Howe, 2012; Smith & Thomas, 2005).

Part of the reason that narratives of overcoming disability have been perpetuated stems from an ableist logic that aligns with the medical model. Ableism has been defined by Linton (1998) as a perspective in which the approach and experience from

a non-disabled perspective remain central, dominant and naturalised. Ultimately the concept is about a set of assumptions and practices that reinforces inequitable treatment of disabled people (Campbell, 2009). The media industries have been complicit in perpetuating ableist narratives in their portrayals of disability and disability sport, where there is an expectation of inferior ability and performance. Thus, an ableist ideology devalues the experience of impairment and disability relegating these discussions to the social margins. Through an ableist lens, disability is represented as “uncivilized, outside or on the margins of humanity” (Hughes, 2012, p.22) and thus feats such as athletic achievements are considered out of the ordinary and even extraordinary. Pullen et al (2018) suggest that one of the reasons that ableist discourse prevails in relation to parasport as a cultural form is that those involved in the production process, journalists, are used to emphasising “perfect, (gendered) idealised neoliberal bodies” ([online]) and, as a result, disability represents a challenging subject matter. Moreover, the commercial imperative behind the growth of the Paralympic Games, which includes objectives to grow sponsorship, television audiences and celebrity icons, also creates and exacerbates the need to represent disabled athletes in a manner commensurate with global consumption (Howe, 2011).

While media interest in the Paralympics was slow to emerge, from the early 2000s a number of scholars have been debating the relative merits and demerits of what has become commonly known as the “supercrip” narrative (Berger, 2008; Hardin & Hardin, 2004; Howe, 2008; Silva & Howe, 2012) with its typically “inspirational” stories of para-athletes defying the odds in order to achieve great feats of athletic prowess. This discourse gives the impression that the seemingly impossible is in fact possible, with Silva & Howe (2012) suggesting that it undermines the position of people with a disability because on one level it elevates them to heroic status by use of the

“super” moniker (raising them heroically above others in the disability community). On the other hand it emphasises the potential to conquer disability through sheer hard work and effort, thereby underestimating the structural and attitudinal barriers that most people with an impairment face. Critics of the supercrip narrative argue that it diverts attention away from the real and material barriers facing people with a disability, offering audiences comfort that “super” para-athletes (superhumans) can carve out wonderful careers and overcome their disability (Grue, 2015; Ellis & Goggins, 2015; Kearney, et al, 2019). As Silva & Howe (2012, p. 188) suggest: “By conveying the idea that all the dreams are possible depending on an individual’s effort and merit, the social injustice of unequal opportunities for ‘able’ and ‘disabled’ people is ignored”.

The media in particular has also been criticised for embracing and emphasising a hierarchy of disability, providing a platform for forms of disability viewed as more “normal” and palatable for audiences – including “wheelchair users and individuals who have acquired disability following an accident or illness” (Hodges et al, 2014, p. 12) – to the exclusion of others. Another noticeable trend, linked to the spectacularisation of the Paralympic Games itself, has been the privileging of cyborgified athlete-prosthetic hybrids (Silva & Howe, 2012) that attract attention in a technology-obsessed environment where audiences demand extraordinary feats of performance. Moreover, the media have also been said to remain broadly reluctant to challenge reductive understandings of disability, with almost all stories still being positive in tone (Howe, 2012). The tabloid press in particular has been unwilling to challenge the governing disability-sport organisations, instead often promoting overly “positive” media coverage of the so-called extraordinary feats of athletes overcoming the odds stacked against them (Howe, 2008; Rees et al, 2017).

Until London 2012, media coverage of the Paralympics was relatively insignificant. Goggin and Newell (2000) suggested that even at the beginning of the new millennium the lived experience of Paralympians remained nearly invisible in media terms. They argued that in the Sydney 2000 Paralympics reporting continued to emphasise the frame of “inspiring” elite athletes overcoming their disability, presenting disability not as a social problem but as an individual one that can be solved. And yet, in recent years, the UK television broadcaster C4 has been lauded in some quarters for its coverage of the Paralympic Games, especially for what was presented as its “edgy” approach. C4 attempted to challenge viewers’ expectations about what living with a disability means at the level of everyday experience. In advance of the London 2012 Olympic Games, the channel launched a trailer for their Paralympic Games coverage titled “Meet the Superhumans” which highlighted the feats of (carefully selected) athletes participating in those Games¹. Whilst the advert, and subsequent coverage of the Paralympic Games, was much heralded – C4’s stated aim was “to challenge stereotypes, and to bring under-represented groups into the mainstream ... Having the Paralympics in London gives us a wonderful opportunity to make a difference to the way disability and disability sports are perceived in this country”² – it also reignited a long-standing debate about media representations of athletes with a disability.

As Ellis & Goggin (2015) conclude, when talking about how transformational the London 2012 Paralympic Games coverage actually was (or wasn’t), “Too often still the recognition and acceptance of disability still stays within the boundaries of celebration of ‘overcoming’, or ‘transcending’, that is, of leaving behind, forgetting, and erasing what troubles us” (2015, p. 75). Similarly, Hodges et al’s (2014) study of the 2012 London Paralympics further emphasised the limited range of stereotypes used in media coverage, indicating that:

the narrative post-Games was largely positive, though often recreating the dominant discourse of ‘astonishing individual achievement against the odds’. The Paralympic coverage did not seem to have adequately tackled concerns about the limited variety of ways disability was engaged with by the media outside of a sporting context (p. 39).

In other words, the way disability and disability sport were “framed” remained limited to a few well-worn, personal, emotional and overly individualised narratives, and continues to emphasise key people and their achievements both inside and outside of sport.

Producing disability: Medical model, gender and hero-combat

It is important to recognise that journalists play a crucial role in reflecting and influencing perceptions of people with a disability because they select the content to cover and circulate these frames to large audiences (Haller et al, 2012; Pullen et al, 2018; Solves et al, 2018). Solves et al (2018) suggest that more attention needs to be paid to how issues including editorial management and organisational intervention affect journalists’ creation of narratives. Referring to Channel 4’s coverage of the 2012 and 2016 Paralympic Games in the UK, Pullen et al (2018) also suggest a greater need to explore production philosophies, practices and decisions and the impact of other external factors on (para)sport coverage (e.g. more inclusive employment practices).

Though different media outlets reach different audiences and influence different age and social demographics, the media industries enable awareness raising and the circulation of important ideas about disability and what is “normal” (Ellis & Goggin,

2015). The selection, emphasis and exclusion that media framing represents (Butler & Bissell, 2015) comes in a number of forms, and with differential currency over time. Haller (2010), for example, proposed four negative media framing devices to depict disability: the medical model; the social pathology model; the supercrip model; and the business model. She also proposed a further three more progressive media frames: the minority/civil rights model; the cultural pluralism model; and the legal model. In relation to media representations of the Toronto 2015 Pan American Games, Misener et al (2018) suggest that there was more emphasis on the rights of people with a disability (the minority/civil rights and legal models) but that the primary media frames still emphasised the supercrip narrative. Relatedly, research focused on the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games (an integrated sport event where the able-bodied and parasport elements run concurrently) suggested that while the supercrip narrative was evident, a new gendered celebrity dimension to print and online representations was noticeable (McPherson et al, 2016). This dimension “spectacularises” the elite para-athlete visually and built on the success of the London 2012 Paralympics in positioning para-athletes as celebrities. For example, Samantha Kinghorn and Megan Dawson-Farrell were presented in stereotypically feminine pink and psychedelic pink and blue respectively in Team Scotland photoshoots and also in marketing literature for the event. Such media representations, particularly when they achieve the (relative) fixity of stereotypes, are powerful in shaping audiences’ beliefs, values and meanings. As Hall et al put it:

Stereotyping ... is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order. It sets up a symbolic frontier between the ‘normal’ and the ‘deviant’, the ‘normal’ and the ‘pathological’, the ‘acceptable’ and the ‘unacceptable’,

what ‘belongs’ and what does not or is ‘Other’, between ‘insiders’ and outsiders’, Us and Them ... *stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power* (2011, p. 248 – their italics).

While Hall and colleagues are talking here about the language of racial stereotyping, these ideas apply equally powerfully to representations of disability, especially when these are communicated to the mega-audiences of a major sporting event. Another useful contribution to the media framing of para-athletes and the Paralympics comes from Kim et al (2017). Reflecting on US television coverage of the Paralympic Games over a 20-year period, they demonstrate the prevalence of “episodic” over “thematic” media framing practices. Episodic framing tends to focus on single events related to individuals, more likely around the private sphere (Iyengar, 1991). This often relates to the representation of “stories with emotional content of athletes with disabilities” (p. 261) relating to personal issues and emotional states. Thematic framing is more focused wider public issues and trends over time such as emphasising a “socially influential atmosphere or ideological movement related to the Paralympic Games and athletes with disabilities” (p. 261). Because episodic frames tend to reduce issues to random events or cases “episodic framing news is apt to be more attractive to the audience because it typically features extreme personal stories or dramatic visual footage and influences emotional appeal” (p. 270). However, an over-emphasis on episodic news coverage can also discourage “the audience from societal attribution for disability issues” (p. 270) because the issues become disconnected from the public sphere of responsibility. In other words, though the audience might experience the emotional appeal of the supercrip narrative with its emphasis on individual human-interest stories alluring, – these stories often revolving around those

injured in accidents or wars, thereby (perhaps unintentionally) creating a two-tier hierarchisation of disability – this framing does little to encourage audiences to consider the need for meaningful social and material change. For example, while the London 2012 Paralympic Games were applauded for the quantity and quality of media coverage, bringing with it an immediately noticeable change in textual and visual language, recent media reports have suggested that little has changed in respect of people with disabilities participating in sport, access to facilities or provision of support services in the UK (Coles, 2018). The lack of contextualised framing drawing attention to broader issues of disability as an important social theme results in less appetite for collective action.

In the remainder of this paper, we focus on UK print and online media coverage of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games, exploring the dominant media frames and framing techniques evident in these outlets. We focus on continuities and discontinuities with some earlier representations, and the potential emergence of new trends and patterns of reporting on disability in this high-profile international sports competition.

Methodology

Data gathering

The Rio Paralympic Games ran from September 2nd-18th, 2016. For the purposes of data gathering, we focused on print and online representations of para-athletes published between July 1st, 2016 and September 30th, 2016 – incorporating the pre-, during and immediate post-event period – in the UK. We used the following search items: Paralympics; Rio 2016 Paralympics; parasport; para-athletes; disability sport; and disabled sport and searched in three stages. First, we searched in the online UK news database Newsbank. Second, we searched three of the main UK broadsheets' (*The*

Guardian, *The Telegraph* and *The Independent*) and three of the main tabloid newspapers' own online sites (*The Sun*, *The Mirror* and the *Scottish Daily Record*) before finally undertaking a Google search using the same terms to ensure as complete coverage as possible. We used this approach to ensure we captured all content from print and online sources, but we were also cognizant to remove duplicates during our search process. In the majority of sources consulted we were able to examine both the text of each article and any associated images.

We filtered the initial returns on the basis of the focus of reports, discarding those whose relevance was low (e.g. straightforward sport results, brief mention of Paralympics but not in the context of disability sport) as well as a small group related to local papers whose URLs were no longer live. This left a usable sample of 373 articles in the spreadsheet created for this purpose. The sample included a mix of newspaper, magazine and online-only publications.

To facilitate the analysis, the usable articles were subdivided as follows, with the relevant number of articles in brackets:

UK press and on-line news sources (320)

Olympic Media Centre and other official output (28)

Entries from Business and/or Marketing sources, mostly in magazines/
specialised internet sites (25)

The mainstream news sources can be subdivided into broadsheets and tabloids along fairly conventional lines, the first group comprising *The Telegraph*, *The Times/Sunday Times* and *The Guardian/Observer* (with the last two only adopting a broadsheet format in their Sunday editions though their content remains that traditionally

associated with broadsheets on weekdays also) and the second *The Sun* and *The Star* as well as the more mid-market *Daily Mail*, *Daily Express* and *The Mirror*. Most were UK-wide in scope, though there were also a number of regional/local/hyperlocal publications (19 in all). The sample included small groups of Scottish, Welsh and Northern Ireland sources (17 in total), and an even smaller number of single-entry samples, all local or hyperlocal in nature (e.g. *The Brighton and Hove Argus* or the *Clydebank Post*). The most meaningful stories for this project were mainly to be found in the UK-wide press group, most notably (2016 Audit Bureau of circulations figures given after each title) *The Mirror* (809,140), *The Telegraph* (472,033), *The Independent* (271,859) and *The Guardian* (164,163). It is noteworthy that the last three in particular tend to be aimed at a well-educated demographic. While popular tabloids such as the more working-class oriented *Sun* and lower-middle class oriented *Daily Mail* exceeded these titles in circulation terms by a very large margin indeed (1,787,096 and 1,589,471 respectively), the latter group's coverage was entirely "episodic" in nature as defined above.

Data analysis

Our analysis of these outputs used a blend of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Foucauldian discourse analysis, which together allowed us to examine both the macro (Foucault) and micro (CDA) dimensions of the texts under analysis. CDA, whose origins lie in Critical Linguistics, pays close attention to specific structural elements of the text being analysed, scrutinising the lexis (the vocabulary used), transitivity (who is doing what to whom), modality (the confidence with which statements are made) as well as genre (factual reporting, interviews, narrative strategies and so on) before moving on to broader ideological interpretation and explanation (Fairclough, 2015).

Foucault, by contrast, specifically disavowed any interest in the text as such. As he put it:

What are described as ‘systems of formation’ do not constitute the terminal stage of discourse, if by that term one means the texts (or words) as they appear with their vocabulary, syntax, logical stricture of rhetorical organization ... In short, it leaves the final placing of the text in dotted outline (p. 84).

Instead he developed the concept of “systems of dispersion” (2002, p. 41) to identify discourses which not only span a potentially uncountable range of texts from very different sources (in our case news, official and business and marketing sources) without being identified with any single one of them, but can also accommodate individual textual expressions of a particular discourse having little or nothing in common at the expressive level (textual, visual, musical, sculptural and so on). Discourses – or more correctly “discursive formations” – are also “spaces of multiple dissensions” (2002, p. 173) since, for Foucault, discourse produces the spaces in which the struggle over meaning takes place.

In this article we do not mobilise a full Foucauldian analysis, but instead a tailored version using key concepts which we deemed most appropriate to our research aims. This approach maps onto what we have successfully used previously to consider the discursive formations in media texts (Authors, 2016). We focus as a result on both textual and visual variations on the supercrip and perhaps more importantly alternative discourses which have emerged more recently illustrating how the shifting balance of power between competing meanings of disability – athletic, militaristic, gender-coded, celebrity-oriented, increasingly political (Authors, 2016) – exist side by side.

Many of the articles collected contained accompanying images. In terms of visual analysis, we paid detailed attention to such structural elements as composition, colour palette, light and shade (*chiaroscuro*), figure and ground and the use of CGI-enabled image enhancement techniques and their broader links with processes of celebrityisation. As the aim of a discourse-analytical approach is not the classical anthropological one of grasping “the intention and purposes of the photographer” (Scherer, 2003, p. 21) but to identify how meanings are elicited from the image in the encounter between its formal characteristics and the broader discursive frame in which these images are located. A key aim is to grasp the *political* nature of images which can at first glance appear, quite incorrectly, as functions of a *depoliticised* realm of sport more generally (Blain and O’Donnell, 1998; Channel, 2013) and of mediated Paralympic sport more specifically (McPherson et al, 2015).

The media event arc

Dayan and Katz coined the term “media events” in 1992 to describe spectacular broadcast occasions such as the Olympic/Paralympic Games. More recently, academic attention has focussed on the media event arc – the overarching narrative structure in which media coverage experiences peaks and troughs and focuses on different discourses in the pre- and post-event period from those during the event itself (McGillivray, 2017). Our study confirmed the findings of previous research in that both the quantity of coverage of the Rio Paralympics and related themes, and the qualitative nature of that coverage, shifted from the pre- to the post-Games period.

In terms of the media event arc, there was very little coverage of the Paralympics until early August 2016, a not unusual pattern given that the early focus is traditionally on what is often considered the main event, the Olympic Games themselves. However,

while the Rio Olympics were buffeted by controversy and received extensive negative media coverage before the sport event itself began, the Paralympic Games suffered even more heavily in this regard with pre-Games coverage focusing on almost wholly negative stories. These included the expulsion of Russian athletes in early August and the announcement of a funding crisis that threatened the Paralympic Games in the middle of the same month. Two sample headlines from July and August 2016 encapsulate the acrimony involved:

Paralympics chief: Russia disgusts me (*Birmingham Mail*, 8th August 2016).

Paralympic ban for Russia ‘one of sport’s darkest days’ (*Daily Telegraph*, 8th August 2016).

Discussions about classification systems and so-called “cheating” also captured some attention, including the *Daily Mail*’s contention that “Cheating scandal has cast a dark shadow over the ‘superhumans’” (6th September 2016), an interesting development as other studies have tended to suggest that only “positive” media reporting is commonplace when covering Paralympic Games and disability sport more generally (Howe, 2008). One of the few positive stories generated early on focused on C4’s “We’re the Superhumans” trailer for its Paralympic coverage³ which both reproduced the supercrip discourse already present in the London 2012 Paralympics trailer and, in what was a deliberately innovative move, also featured a range of disabled people engaging in not necessarily sport-related activities such as drumming or even flying a helicopter.

Once the Opening Ceremony had taken place, the focus of reporting rapidly turned to the sport events themselves with the accompanying plethora of times, positions, personal bests, medal table positions and so on, accompanied by a predominantly celebratory mood. These tended to feature immediate post-race individual celebrations:

Figure 1 about here

or triumphant (almost always British) winners leading a field of more or less anonymised “others”:

Figure 2 about here

Post-event images for their part are routinely posed and almost invariably feature union flags, making the “national pride” as opposed to the athletic prowess dimension of the celebration very clear:

Figure 3 about here

The *Evening Standard* of 19th September 2016 offered a gallery of no fewer than 145 images of para-athletes ranging from action shots (the vast majority) to highly posed representations⁴. It reveals a visual repertoire of celebration which is extremely limited and repetitive. These representations can be usefully contrasted with the *Mirror*’s rather smaller gallery of images published on 20th September 2016 after the Games had finished and the official (national) celebratory function had moved from centre stage: many of the images are by contrast informal and a number are in fact family shots, highlighting the move to a different non-celebrating discursive frame⁵.

Post-Games there was a much more questioning tone to some of the coverage with a number of articles focusing on the merely “temporary pride” that athletes, disabled people and audiences enjoyed during the event and the thorny topic of legacy coming more to the fore. We return to this point in greater depth below.

Representing disability

Return of the superhumans: supercrip in focus

The supercrip discourse was one of the four “negative” frames identified by Haller (2010). Channel 4 itself did not see its own coverage of the Rio Paralympic Games as uncritically reproducing this discourse. For example Dan Brooke, the channel’s chief marketing and communications officer, had this to say in mid-July 2016:

‘Meet the Superhumans’ helped the London 2012 Paralympics become the first of its kind to sell out. It hopes to replicate this with its second attempt. As it aims to “take another step forward” in changing the conversation around disability, the new [2016] ad works to widen the definition of what ‘superhuman’ is by featuring Paralympic athletes alongside everyday people with disabilities going about their daily lives (*The Drum*, 21st July 2016).

While the inclusion of non-elite athletes in the video trailer reinforced the notion that disabled people were being given a platform to challenge existing stereotypes, this did not always come through in either the headlines or main body of articles assessed as part of this study, as the following pre-event headlines show:

Forget about the Olympics, it’s the Paralympics where the true superhumans perform (*The Conversation*, 26th August 2016).

Paralympics 2016: Meet Shropshire's heroes as the 'Superhumans' return
(*Shropshire Star*, 28th August 2016).

The accompanying modality, far from being problematising, is strongly assertive (both headlines feature commands) and the lexis constantly recycles terms such as “guts”, “determination” and more generally a “can do” attitude:

Through sheer guts and determination, Jack, who now lives in Gloucester, has established himself as one of the country's top disabled footballers
(*Birmingham Mail*, 23rd August 2016).

If we continue to raise the bar then we can move away from the word disability and focus more on our ability (*Daily Record*, 23rd August 2016).

In fact the supercrip discourse continued to accompany sports-related reporting for the remainder of the Games. In terms of transitivity, the Paralympians – more specifically successful Paralympians – were assertively presented as the outstanding bearers of agency: they emerged as the unchallenged stars and bearers of national pride (a point to which we return below), quite literally embodying the classic Olympic triad of “Citius, Altius, Fortius” – “Faster, Higher, Stronger” – though the relentless focus on winning tended to recode this motto as “Fastest, Highest, Strongest”.

Visual coverage used a wide range of effects to stress speed (athletes – more often a single athlete – in clear focus against a blurred background):

Figure 4 about here

and strength (weight lifters pictured from above instead of the more usual eye-level presentations):

Figure 5 about here

The impact of the angle of shot becomes clear if we compare the image above with the one below which combines a different relationship between athlete and equipment on the one hand with an equally different relationship between gender and power on the other:

Figure 6 around here

Images such as these – the first has been the beneficiary of CGI enhancing – both spectacularise the presentation and lend it a clear “hero-making” dimension, connecting it with likewise “heroic” visual depictions which audiences will recognise from broader film and television-related promotional stills, increasing their sense of familiarity. Some images, on the other hand, foregrounded sheer guts (close-ups of contorted faces) of Paralympians “overcoming” their disabilities):

Figure 6 about here

Tanni Grey-Thompson did not compete in fact in 2016, but rather the image above had also been published four years earlier, also in the *Daily Mail*, on 26th March 2012. It shows the ability of images judged in some way “iconic” to retain their power and relevance over time as discourses become more deeply embedded and as a result in some sense move “out of time”. As Howe & Parker (2012) argue, exemplars like Tanni Grey-Thompson demonstrate how “iconicity is determined not by their iconic status alone but by the levels of ‘subjective identification’ to which they are open and the degree to which their depiction transcends and outgrows its origins” (p. 276). Grey-Thompson is not simply a sporting icon but had become by the early 2000s “the epitome of economic fetishism, the process and product of representations and images promoted

and exchanged via the complex nexus of modern-day media networks” (p. 275). This economic fetishism is reproduced at will in support of the sport media complex that reifies the discourse of power and iconography.

Representing versus defending one’s country

It is often argued that the modern Paralympics grew out of the Stoke Mandeville Games for wounded war veterans, whose mantle they officially took over in 1960. Until recently, however, this legacy has remained very much in the background of media coverage of the Games. Despite this, due primarily to mounting casualties arising from UK military involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the “heroism” element of the supercrip discourse has extended to place the disability in question in a specifically military context. Batts and Andrews (2011) have noted a link between parasport and military which has become further entrenched with the Invictus Games, an event reserved for impaired army veterans irrespective of country of origin. The origins also stem from programmes such as ‘Soldier On’ (Canada) which links wounded soldiers up with specific sports as part of their “rehabilitation” and “re-entry” back to a new life with their impairment. We were able to identify seven articles in our sample referring to impairment suffered by former army personnel. These articles were to be found in the *Shropshire Star* (28th August 2016, the *Daily Mail* (7th September 2016), the *Mail Online* (7th September 2016), the *Independent* (10th September 2016), the *Sunday Times* (11th September 2016), the *BBC Newsbeat* (12th September 2016) and the *Scottish Evening Times* (13th September 2016). The coverage is typically terse with the focus on the cause and nature rather than the consequences of the impairment:

Townsend is a Royal Marine who lost both of his legs while stepping on an improvised explosive device in Afghanistan in February 2008 (*Independent*, 10th September 2016).

Among [the Paralympians] will be Shrewsbury's Nick Beighton, who lost both legs after being blown up by a roadside bomb while serving in Afghanistan in 2009 (*Shropshire Star*, 28th August 2016).

One of the most striking images, which “packed” five disabled athletes into the same small space – the composite nature of the image depriving the athletes in question of all context – is shown immediately below with its original bold-text caption, the military dimension being heightened by two of the “weapons” used – the bow and the club:

Figure 8 around here

This is one of the clearest examples in our sample of the “cyborgification” of the para-athlete (Howe, 2011), where the prostheses are on the verge of becoming more important than the individual concerned. The gendered dimension of the composite image is also immediately striking, four men and one woman, and with tattoo-bedecked Micky Yule dominating the composition.

The most extended contribution of all, however, was the *Mail Online*’s 836-word-long article, complete with six images and four tweets, on Henry Charles Albert David Mountbatten-Windsor (more commonly known as Prince Harry, sixth in line of succession to the British throne) and his links with both the Invictus and the Paralympic Games. The article is entitled “‘Cherish this moment’: Prince Harry tweets a rousing message wishing Invictus athletes success in Rio as the Paralympic Games get underway” (5th September 2016). Harry is a patron of the Invictus Games, first

organised with his close involvement in 2014 and 2016. In representational terms the article is at least as much about the Prince as it is about the athletes, and is very much in line with the *Mail's* routine appropriation of royals (and other celebrities) for promotional purposes. As a result a number of powerful discourses converge in this article, their clearest common denominator being a celebration of British national identity into which the actual Scottishness of Micky Yule disappears completely. The political importance of the symbolic role of the British Royal Family as an indicator of national identity, particularly in tabloids such as *The Daily Mail*, cannot be underestimated (Blain and O'Donnell, 2003).

The inclusion of former military personnel in the textual and visual representations would appear to bring a new element to the representation of disability in the Paralympics, but closer analysis shows that this is not entirely the case. While the concept of “representing your nation” appears with some regularity in the lexis of Starling’s recent (2017) interviews with a wide range of athletes involved in the Invictus Games, it is outnumbered by the many references to “serving” or even “defending” your country. One of Prince Harry’s tweets to the UK Paralympic athletes contained the following: “Cherish the moment as you get set to serve your country again”. The verbs “serve” and “defend” never appear in this sense in media coverage of the Paralympic Games we have analysed (as opposed to the former’s broader sense of “being on active duty”). And while Starling’s book gives detailed and often distressing accounts of the devastating effects of war-related casualties, the Paralympic media frame is overwhelmingly one of “representing”, ideally through winning medals. The difference between the veterans and the other competitors is thereby reduced to fleeting references to, and decontextualised images of their injuries. The dominant discourse remains that of the glamorised, celebritised and now militarised supercrip.

Gendered spectacle

Cooky & Messner (2013) have argued that journalists' professional habitus tends to produce accounts of perfectly gendered, idealised neoliberal (sporting) bodies. Coverage of parasport would seem an obvious place for such a focus to be challenged. However, a recent study (McPherson et al, 2016) highlighted the gendered difference in the ways in which male and female para-athletes were represented during the 2014 Glasgow Commonwealth Games demonstrating the inability (or unwillingness) of journalists to disrupt idealised gendered narratives. Our study of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games revealed that representations of named male athletes (we return to two images of unnamed male athletes below) never strayed from the now conventional focus on strength, stamina, speed and skill which also dominated the bulk of representations of the female athletes. On the contrary, there were some representations of female para-athletes which glamorised or even eroticised their representation. These images were carefully posed (and composed) as opposed to the more common action shots featured earlier.

Figure 8 about here

The athletes shown above are the composite rather than collective object, and the focus is on well-coiffured feminine elegance rather than on strength and power. As Howe and Parker put it (2012, pp. 277-8):

Once again the pressures of a highly feminised consumer culture are clearly evident where issues of disability are concerned simply because of the anxieties which it creates around notions of elegance, youth and the 'aesthetics of physical perfection' (Bordon 1990, Hargreaves 1994).

In addition, the fact that only the athletes' faces are in the light removes any possible focus on their physical impairments or prosthetics. The most clearly gendered (indeed eroticised) image of all featured tennis player Jordanne Whiley:

Figure 9 about here

This image in fact belongs to a broader trend of photographing able-bodied athletes in the nude, a number of which were reproduced by the *Mirror* on 1st September 2016⁶:

Neither of the images above came from the generalist UK press, but their soliciting of a male gaze seems (albeit to different degrees and differently framed) clear enough, potentially demonstrating in Jordanne Whiley's case a borderline example of what we might call a "soft-porn-crip". An unconscious division of labour may be developing as regards representations of female para-athletes, where clearly and self-consciously gendered representations are being limited to more specialised or even overtly artistic fields. The images reproduced above were clearly taken with the approval and collaboration of the athletes involved and there is no immediate reason to believe that, within the frame of this rather different discursive formation with its different surfaces of emergence, they did not find them empowering.

A political discourse gathers force: media and social change

Given the unmistakably "promotional" nature of many of the images and campaigns surrounding the Paralympics, it is perhaps no surprise that the business and marketing outlets analysed were universally positive about the C4 "Superhumans" video and what they saw as its socially "positive" message, with one outlet claiming that "Channel 4's 2016 Paralympics ad We're The Superhumans is uplifting, wonderful and possibly 'ad of the year'":

Channel 4's ad for the 2016 Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro ... is the symbol of positivity that we need right now. It seems that there's an ever-flowing feed of tragedy, confusion, anger and sadness across TV, online and social media right now – and we desperately need something hopeful and uplifting (*DigitalArtsOnline*, 15th July 2016).

A striking feature of the supercrip discourse is already evident in this quote; while triumphs are routinely attributed to named individuals, Paralympians can also find themselves reduced to symbols as explicitly stated above. When the focus broadens to the broader media and social environment, the modality becomes notably more hesitant and defensive and the lexis moves to one more fully centred on tragedy and confusion, emphasising that mega events represent a fleeting moment in time and are limited in their potential impact for that reason (Pullen et al, 2018). As early as 22nd August, before the Olympics had begun, the *Independent* ran an article with the headline “For disabled people like me, it's clear that the Paralympics are nothing more than an afterthought”, the first sentence reading “Undervalued. Underfunded. Overlooked”. On 27th August the online site Scroll.in likewise offered the headline “New motto for the Rio Paralympics: Faster, Higher ... Broker?”. The tone became harsher when the Paralympics began, with *The Guardian* (19th September 2016) insisting “Paralympic glory must not cover up harsh reality of daily struggles”. Even the language of the supercrip came in for direct criticism in *The Drum*: “Media outlets and journalists have been cautioned against the use of certain words when reporting on the Paralympic Games after a disability research report revealed that a number of commonly used terms including ‘superhuman’, ‘brave’ and ‘heroes’ could offend disabled people”.

While the supercrip discourse did not disappear, a number of stories repurposed it to draw attention to the challenges facing para-athletes on a day-to-day basis. This critical coverage appeared particularly in *The Guardian* and *Independent* as well as the *Mirror* – all broadly speaking left-leaning. The quotes below, for example, focus on anonymity rather than celebrity and on the burden of representation of which the athletes are objects rather than subjects:

Yes, the Paralympics are opening. So for a couple of weeks, those of us who've been shouting into the ether about disability issues, and para-sports, might get half an ear tilted in our directions.

But as for all that stuff about star athletes inspiring those who are a little less than what Channel 4 has been calling “super human”, it just isn't happening. Perhaps it's time to ask why. Funding, of course, will always be an issue and there are already calls being made for more of it. I'm not going to argue with them (*Independent*, 9th August 2016).

The hyping of disabled athletes into superhuman status by Channel 4 only deepens our wounds, inflicted by continual assaults on our daily lives. It truly seems that the only acceptable disabled person is a Paralympian – and then only for a few weeks. The disabled sportspeople who went to Rio also carried the burden of securing Channel 4's viewing figures on the back of a massive publicity campaign (*Guardian*, 6th September 2016).

Immediately below we provide a further example from the British online magazine *Spiked* on 23rd September 2016, which broadens the scope of critique to include journalistic and scholarly sources:

The Paralympics are underway. In preparation for the event, the United Kingdom's Paralympic broadcaster, Channel 4, recently released a trailer entitled, "We're The Superhumans." The video has been viewed millions of times and has received a lot of praise.

However, not everyone, particularly people with disabilities, is pleased or flattered, because the trailer reproduces a common, misrepresentative and oppressive trope: the inspirational "supercrip." It is, drawing from Stella Young, the late journalist and disability activist, "inspiration porn"

Continuing a few lines later:

Many disabled people know that disability is a social construct. This is a kindergarten-level social model of disability, developed by disabled academics over 40 years ago. It forms the rock on which we pitch our actions and protests. It highlights the utter pointlessness of these endless government schemes, and the encouraging of employers (et al) to like us and employ us – while the unending fact of inaccessible environments and savage attacks on our services continues to invalidate such proposals.

The Guardian was the most direct of all in its overall critique:

Ultimately we come back to the excesses of capitalism, and years of government lack of interest as a natural result of it. The barriers to our participation, our wellbeing and our existence can be removed and at least improved by financial input into infrastructure, social care and a fully compliant civil rights law (*Guardian*, 6th September 2016).

The relatively few visuals accompanying this contentious discourse were notable for their lack of glamour, presenting the athletes not in high-speed visual surroundings but as isolated figures, sometimes shrouded in darkness – occasionally to the point of appearing in silhouette – frequently off-centre within the visual frame or even facing away from the camera rather than toward it:

Figure 10 about here

The use of chiaroscuro to stress isolation and neglect was at times very striking:

Figure 11 about here

This image not only drains the para-athlete of colour and light, it simultaneously emphasises his physical lack of stature compared with the walking figure and places him out of centre and in a following rather than leading position.

Even more compelling representations can occasionally be found. Thus an article in *The Guardian* on 15th September tells the story of Junior Sterling, four years previously a volunteer at the London Olympics and now reduced to a life of squalor.

The text begins:

Exactly four years ago, surrounded by placards saying “Equality” and “Rights”, Junior Sterling was performing to millions of people in London’s Paralympic opening ceremony. But despite all the talk of the Games’ legacy

for disabled people in Britain, the 55-year-old, who was born with a muscle-wasting disease and club foot, has been left to live in a kitchen covered in mould and with a bucket for his bathroom ... What no one realised, however, was that after spending his day around Paralympians, as Junior puts it to me: “I’d go back to my home infested with bugs.”

Two of the accompanying images are given below, the first showing how, deprived of its broader celebratory frame, his torch has lost all its symbolic power and the second the condition of his living quarters:

Images of campaigns involving disabled people were the rarest of all – only one in our entire sample published in *The Mirror* on 8th September:

Figure 14 about here

In this strictly unglamorous and uncelebratory image, where the demonstrators huddle in a corner facing a police cordon, the “super” of supercrip has disappeared, leaving only the “crip” behind.

Conclusion

Previous literature showed clearly that the supercrip discourse was still very much in the ascendancy in the period before the Rio Paralympics, even if increasingly challenged from various quarters. Our analysis has demonstrated that that discourse, despite continuing reservations from many stakeholders (Pullen et al, 2018), continues to enjoy rude health during the Rio Paralympics, being a staple of coverage from hyperlocal press outlets to leading broadsheets. In addition it had extended its influence to become a central element of official Paralympic publications and others located in the business and marketing sector, this latter group having been little analysed before.

Visual expressions of the discourse also gained in prominence, and were a key factor in feeding the increasing celebritisation of both Games and individuals, aided by the frequent use of human-interest backstories of “superhumans” (Pullen et al, 2018, p5). The theme of national pride and prominence continued but, linked to the emergence and popularity of the Invictus Games, was joined by an increasing collocation with battle-related causes of disability and a corresponding increase in “cyborgified” bodies. These hyper-masculinised war-related frames were in turn accompanied by an increasing stress of what we might call more “traditional” and even on occasions mildly erotic manifestations of femininity where prostheses were airbrushed from view.

Our study also identified discontinuities with previous research in this area. Most obvious was the increasing presence of an often highly sophisticated and at times openly aggressive politicised narrative, especially in (though not restricted to) the left-leaning mid-market and broadsheet press, on occasion addressing policy failings at government level, seeking to address the everyday circumstances of people with a disability in the UK. (Para)sport, though perhaps only for a fleeting moment in time, facilitated a conversation about non-sporting matters – something that could provide the basis for activists and disabled persons’ organisations to exploit in the future.

The central focus of the discursive formation of the Rio Paralympics in the UK media was, then, the management of the many and varied overlapping, competing and at times clashing representations surrounding the expectations and desires brought to the fore by the multiple textual and visual engagements the event generated. While acknowledging the excitement and even pleasure the Games evoke, the focus of the authors was to investigate how the event is being repurposed to better represent and therefore, to however small an extent, improve the lived experience of those dealing with disabilities in less glamorous contexts. Both the strength and the limitations of

the supercrip discourse remain clear, easily absorbing emergent or new domains while simultaneously opening up new political perspectives, but always caught “within extant power structures, doing little to shatter dominant discursive disability frames” (Pullen et al, 2018).

Even so, while the overall balance of media representations of the Rio Paralympics may not be entirely positive, there are signs that at the very least things are pointing in the right direction. The social model of disability was very much more visible here than it was as recently as the Commonwealth Games in 2014 (McPherson et al, 2016), where it was in turn more forceful than at London in 2012: the critique was more powerful, the engagement more muscular, the focus more sustained and the range greatly increased. Only future events will tell if this improvement will be a lasting one.

Notes

¹ The trailer can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tuAPPeRg3Nw>

² The full text can be found at:

https://www.channel4.com/media/documents/corporate/Paralympic_booklet.pdf

³ The trailer can be found here (among a great many other sources):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IocLkk3aYlk>

⁴ The gallery can be accessed at <https://www.standard.co.uk/sport/bahman-golbarnezhad-remembered-during-paralympic-games-closing-ceremony-in-the-maracana-a3348046.html>.

⁵ It can be accessed at <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/rio-olympic-paralympic-heroes-two-8877527>

⁶ <https://www.mirror.co.uk/sport/other-sports/superhuman-paralympians-prove-theyre-great-8750546>

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Figures



Figure 1: Richard Whitehead claimed gold on a stunning day for Team GB (Picture: Getty)

Metro, 12 September 2016



Figure 2: Jonnie Peacock wins gold

Guardian, 10 September 2016



Figure 3: Kadeena Cox with the Union Flag

Yorkshire Evening Post, 19 September 2016



Figure 4: Athletic prowess in sharp focus

Telegraph, 14 September 2016



Figure 5: Weightlifting

itsnicethat.com, 14 July 2016



Figure 6: Weightlifting from a different angle

BBC, 16 July 2016



Figure 7: Tanni Grey-Thompson

Daily Mail, 21 August 2016



Figure 8: “Superheroes: These five former military personnel will represent Britain in Rio de Janeiro”

Daily Mail, 7 September 2016



Figure 8: The Paralympic swimming team

Swim England, 17 September 2016



Figure 9: Jordanne Whiley

Sport Magazine UK, 1 September 2016



Figure 10: Isolation

Metro, 7 September 2016



Figure 11: Anonymity

Independent, 17 September 2016



Figure 12: Junior Sterling

The Guardian, 15 September 2016



Figure 13: Detail of his living quarters

The Guardian, 15 September 2016



Figure 14: Disabled campaigners surrounded by police

The Mirror, 8 September 2016